

Trackside Telephones

By Bryan Seip - Montour Railroad Historical Society

As traffic on the Montour Railroad increased in the early 1900's, a method for the train crews to contact the dispatcher at Montour Junction while they were working out on the main line was needed. Written orders picked up at the dispatcher's office at the beginning of a shift would often become outdated before a train finished its run, as other trains were also working on the single track main line. The telegraph system then in use for communications had a limited number of receiving locations.

Thus, a telephone system was installed, with phones at strategic locations on the main line. This system enabled the train conductor to contact the dispatcher to clear his train for travel on various sections of the railroad. The telephone system originated in 1903 when the Pittsburgh Coal Company created the Montour Telephone Company and installed telephone lines to connect its coal mines with its headquarters building in downtown Pittsburgh. It was a simple matter to piggyback the railroad's telephone system onto the network.

During the 1914 expansion of the railroad to West Mifflin, the telephone system was expanded along the main and subsequent branch lines as they were built. The system eventually covered the 50-plus miles of the Montour Railroad.



A railroad telephone booth sits beside the west switch at North Star Junction.

When a train crew was working off of the main line at a mine or on a branch track, the conductor could use the telephone when he needed to contact the dispatcher for a train order giving permission to re-enter the main line.

The 1940 Montour Railroad Employee Timetable lists 48 telephones installed between Montour Junction and Mifflin Junction. The major sidings had telephones at each end,

and additional telephones were installed at junctions, as well as the agent manned stations at Imperial, Champion, Southview and Library.

At some locations there were no sidings, junctions or stations for several miles and thus no telephones along the main line. If a problem occurred with a train in those areas prior to radio communications, the conductor might have to walk quite a distance to the nearest telephone booth to report the problem to the dispatcher.

The original telephones were located in boxes mounted on the telephone/telegraph poles that were installed along the railroad. These telephones were eventually reinstalled in telephone booths to protect them (and the users) from inclement weather. The telephone booths were built either on site or in the Carpentry Shop at Montour Junction and were maintained by the Bridge & Building Department.



An authentic replica of a Montour Railroad telephone booth was built from photographs and memories by ex-Montour employee Tim Sposato and the folks at the Age of Steam Roundhouse in Sugar Creek, OH.

A pair of wires ran from the nearest telephone pole through the rear wall of the telephone booth to a double-fused knife switch. The fuses protected the telephone from current surges caused by lightning strikes hitting the wires along the railroad. Each telephone booth contained a set of dry cell batteries for power and a small magneto

(generator) for the ringer. A door equipped with a standard Montour switch lock was used to keep unauthorized people from using the telephones.

Closing the knife switch activated the phone on the system. Using the hand crank, a series of long and short rings (ring code) signaled the party being called. For example, the ring code for the Dispatcher at Montour Junction was different than the code for the Yard Master at Champion or the agent at Library.

Radio communications came into use in the early 1970's eliminating the need for the trackside telephones. However, the "crank phones" were still in use at Montour Junction into the 1980's, when the railroad discontinued operations. They were used to communicate between floors in the office building and with the Engine House, Car Shops, Champion Yard Office and the foreman's office at the Champion Preparation Plant, giving those locations an independent intercom system.

Thanks to Bob Ciminel for research and information included in this topic. More info can be found at montourrr.com.

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